

Management Techniques for Challenging Young Children

When children are lead poisoned, they may show various learning and behavior problems. These challenging children frequently feel that they are bad, and these feelings may make them angry and aggressive. Caring adults—parents, daycare providers, or others—can help by spending short periods of time one-on-one with these children in pleasant activities, such as reading a story or doing a project. Such activities help develop warm relationships, and children often begin to feel better about themselves.

Note that although challenging behaviors may indicate lead poisoning, they may also suggest other problems.

Routines

Challenging children usually behave more appropriately if they have a daily routine, an established sequence of events. The routine may include:

- Wake up
- Use bathroom
- Wash face and hands
- Eat breakfast
- Brush teeth
- Dress
- Free play
- Leave for
sitter/daycare/school
- Snack on return home
- Outdoor play
- Watch TV
- Eat dinner
- Brush teeth
- Bathe or shower
- Go to bed

A routine should allow for some flexibility, but it should also provide a regular structure for the child's day. Children should know what to expect and what their rules are for the routine.

Adjust the Environment

Adults should try to arrange the environment so that children do not have opportunities to display inappropriate behaviors. For example, if a child becomes too excited by noise, use carpeting to reduce the sound level, limit the number of children who can play in an area at any one time, and use plastic toys rather than metal ones.

Label Behaviors and Give Positive Directions

Use nonjudgmental labels to identify inappropriate behaviors, and tell children what they need to do about them. For example, "You're overexcited. You need to take a break before something gets broken." Or, "I know you're having trouble paying attention, but I want you to look at me and listen to my instructions."

Techniques for Specific Problems

For very active children

Step in before children lose control. Tell them they are too excited. They may move to another activity, cool off with a quiet activity (for example, reading or playing with clay), or blow off steam by active but safe play. Stay calm and speak with a soft voice, even if the children are screaming. Act as a good role model, and show the children that you are under control, even if they are not.

For children who are easily distracted

Move children to new activities if they can no longer concentrate on a task or give them a break and have them return to the task later. Remember that most preschool children have relatively short attention spans.

For unpredictable children

Provide a structured routine so that children know what to expect. Don't make a big fuss over their unpredictable traits. For example, at mealtime, tell them they are expected to be at the table, but don't make them eat. Then don't keep them very long at the table.

For children who have trouble stopping an activity

Warn children that the end of the activity is approaching. Give them limits that they can understand: "You can push the lever two more times, and then you must stop."

For children whose senses are extremely sensitive

Some children are very sensitive to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. When possible, adjust the environment and adapt to their wishes: reduce loud noises and bright lights, let Sue wear the same coat every day, and give Jamal a peanut butter sandwich for lunch every day. Otherwise, offer the child choices and give her time to adjust gradually. For example, if the child is a picky eater, allow her to choose among a variety of new items and let her get used to seeing and smelling them as others eat them.

For children who withdraw or adapt poorly to new things

Warn the child that something different is about to happen. Tell the child what the sequence of events will be. Allow the child time to adjust to the new situation, watching from the sidelines for a while. Encourage the child to stay near a caring adult during the experience.

For children who have negative moods

Ignore the negative mood or attitude, which you cannot change, and concentrate on the child's behavior. Encourage and praise behaviors that you feel are positive, and ignore the mood.

Adapted with permission from “Managing Challenging Children,” by Cathy Malley, in *What You Should Know about Lead Poisoning: A Resource Manual for Childcare Providers*, developed by Maureen T. Mulroy, Karen Filchak, and Mary-Margaret Gaudio, Storrs: University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System, 1997.